

ED 404 658

CS 215 752

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TITLE Dialogic Teaching in a Monologic Culture.  
PUB DATE 29 Mar 96  
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).  
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; \*Freshman Composition; Grades (Scholastic); Higher Education; Student Evaluation; Student Needs; \*Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; Writing (Composition)  
IDENTIFIERS \*Academic Discourse Communities; \*Dialogic Communication; Dialogic Education

## ABSTRACT

Dialogic learning is what one instructor calls "speaking back to other voices as a reader and a writer." The idea is for students to situate their own voices in the voices of classmates and texts on subjects they are studying. Students interview each other, use each other's knowledge along with written sources as part of the "voices" informing their research and position papers. This approach is used because academic writing can be cold, and students need to feel that they have a place and a voice in academic writing. Ironically, a breakdown in communication occurred between the instructor and several of her students who, disgruntled with their grades, were unwilling to engage in any dialogue about their work or progress. It appears that the main goal of these students is not to better understand their difficulties with writing but to register complaints--they seem unwilling to listen or to talk about matters seriously or at length. These students inhabit a culture where the first rule of discourse is the rule of courtesy, and courtesy means not really listening to another's voice; it means pretending to make each other feel good while business is transacted. These students seem to be saying, "You may not think what I say amounts to anything but you could at least give me a good grade so I wouldn't have to think about it." (TB)

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Presentation to CCCC: Milwaukee, March 29, 1996

Session Title: Personal Writing and Self-Disclosure

Presentation Title: Situating the Personal: The Social Idiom of the Self--aka: Dialogic Teaching in a Monologic Culture

### Dialogic Teaching in a Monologic Culture

I am teaching a second-semester Reading, Writing, and Research course for Freshmen. I have focused the course on dialogic learning--or, for the sake of avoiding jargon with students, what I call "speaking back to other voices as a reader and writer." The idea is for students to situate their own voices in response to the voices of classmates and texts on subjects they are studying. Students interview each other, use each other's knowledge along with written sources as part of the "voices" informing their research and position papers, and we try to be very dialogical. I'm doing all this because I think how cold academic writing can be, and how I want my students to have place they can feel as their own in the discourse of so-called academic reading and writing.

I sit at home one afternoon, midway through the course, thinking how to answer an e-mail message from a freshman student I'll call "Tammy," who stormed out of class the day before, saying, in response to my comments on her paper, "This is stupid--the assignment's stupid--you're stupid." I had asked the student to rewrite her analysis of an advertisement so that

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her paper followed the assignment and developed the analysis beyond two short paragraphs; her revision contained three paragraphs, covering barely three quarters of a page. The message tells me that she apologizes for speaking that way, but that she did what she was supposed to, she deserves a higher grade, and affirms that, in effect, I am still stupid. She has not shown much interest in speaking back to the advertiser's text; but she is very interested in speaking back to me.

The next day in class, I ask this student, who avoids eye contact with me, to please see me after class. I tell her that I got her e-mail message, and I repeat my suggestion from the other day: that if she will come to my office so we can talk over her expectations and my own, I imagine we can reach some understanding. She doesn't see me after class. But instead, another student stays after. I'll call her "Kristin."

Kristin has spoken with me before, mostly to tell me that she is unhappy with the grades I give her. She too will come to my office only reluctantly. As we begin to speak and the class fills with students arriving for the next class, I suggest we go to my office. But I find that, like the previous student, Kristin's main goal is to register a complaint--discussing the issue in any depth would seem to put her at a disadvantage, so that is not her concern.

She tells me "for my own information," as she calls it, that my responses to her work do not correspond to what is fair or what she deserves, since she is an English major, and English is "my good subject." She'll talk to me if I want, but she has

nothing else to say, since there are others in class who agree with her. When I ask whether I could help by explaining my comments on her paper, she says, "I can read, I understand them perfectly. I just don't think you give us credit for what we say." I ask whether a teacher doesn't need to assess how effectively a student does what she does, the frustration rising in my voice. Kristin turns and walks out angrily. "You're not going to make me mad in front of these people. Just forget it." I look up at the silent faces of the students in the next class, as they watch the scene and then look at me. We have done this three times now at the end of my class.

The next day, at my office at home again, I think how ironic it is that we've just studied the logic of arguments and my students are telling me that they don't care about my reasons for responding to their words as I have, they care only about the fact that they deserve better. The phone rings, and when I get up to answer it, a voice I don't know addresses me as Mr. Siebert, and asks me how I am. When I inquire who it is that wants to know, I am told that I am being called on behalf of Roseland Funeral Home, and that a plot has been reserved in my name for me and my family. Good timing, I think, given the state of higher education in the state of Virginia. But I get serious and say that I'm not interested. Then the woman insists, and her insistence reminds me of my students. She is not trying to sell me anything, she tells me, only trying to inform me about the wonderful facilities at Roselawn. Have I or any of my family members been to Roselawn?

At this existential moment in my semester, I feel deperate at the prospect of one more monologic conversation. I say to this woman on the phone in a cold voice, "Didn't you understand me? I said I was not interested."

"There's no reason for you to get rude with me, Sir," she replies. "I'm only trying to tell you that we've reserved a place for you at Roselawn, and that if you or a family member would like to come out sometime, we'd be more than happy to show you around."

"Yes, I understand," I say, "and isn't it rude of you to continue this conversation when I said I wasn't interested?"

"You don't need to speak to me that way," she continues. "You don't have any right to be rude to me," she says, and she hangs up.

This is where I am with my students, I think. We inhabit a culture where the first rule of discourse is the rule of courtesy, and courtesy means not really listening to another's voice, but pretending well enough that we make the other feel good while we transact our business. In place of dialogue there is mutual agreement to respect one another's monologues, and to do so politely. Substance, if it threatens the niceties of any dialogue, is not nice, is rude, and is not permissible. Tammy and Kristin had been saying to me, in effect, "You may not think what I say amounts to anything, but you could at least not make me feel bad by telling me. Or you could at least give me a good grade, so I wouldn't have to think about it." As with the saleswoman from Roselawn, my inquiry into the claims of their

language to me was a violation of their good intentions. The saleswoman wanted as sale, and the students wanted a grade.

This, it occurs to me, is the fate of teaching in a consumer culture. At points of conflict between people and their ideas, "good manners" and one's "rights" become the crucial issue, so that significant scrutiny of one's ideas and one's possible shortcomings can be avoided, and "good feelings" can be maintained. The self-esteem of these students, so apparently fragile at this point, would be susceptible to damage if an open discussion of their work were to take place.

For my end of the dialogue, my response ought to be, "Thank you for shopping Radford University." I try to create dialogue in my classroom, but the product students want is to not be hassled with details. I start to feel like a character in a Raymond Carver story, lost in a world of monologues, as I turn to my computer to finally write Tammy a note of response.

"Tammy," I begin, wondering why it's my role to maintain the dialogue at all costs to my own dignity. It makes sense to me that you would apologize. The problem is still that until we talk further, I don't know if we will ever reach an understanding about why I've said what I've said to you or why you've said what you've said to me. How should we start?"



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